



Hybrid

Revue des arts et médiations humaines

12 | 2024

Naissance et renaissance des mèmes

Teaching and communicating the Middle Ages through memetics

Marina Gazzini



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/4832>

DOI: 10.4000/12m9w

ISSN: 2276-3538

Translation(s):

Enseigner et communiquer le Moyen Âge à travers la mémétique - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/4530> [fr]

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Vincennes

Electronic reference

Marina Gazzini, "Teaching and communicating the Middle Ages through memetics", *Hybrid* [Online], 12 | 2024, Online since , connection on 06 November 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/4832> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/12m9w>

This text was automatically generated on November 6, 2024.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-SA 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Teaching and communicating the Middle Ages through memetics

Marina Gazzini

Introduction

- 1 In recent years, the success of social networks has seen the proliferation of Internet memes, forms of digital communication consisting of still or animated images, usually accompanied by a short commentary text. Somewhere between humorous entertainment and a critical look at society, memes can be used sometimes to convey complex messages, creating bonds between users through the relational register of irony. Indeed, memes are not just tools for communication, but embrace a complex system of social motivations and cultural activities that is both the result of communication and the impetus for such communication.
- 2 With this article, I wish to offer the contribution of a medievalist to an interdisciplinary reflection on memetics in the era of the so-called “third wave” of communication (Toffler, 1980). As known, the concept and the term “meme” rose in an evolutionary biological context in the 1970s.¹ A meme is an entity of information subject to a mechanism of replication, mutation and selection that, analogous to the way a gene is thought to work in the transmission of information for the expression of a character or function, occurs in the cultural sphere. Memetics has enjoyed amplified attention since the 1990s: from neo-Darwinian evolutionary biology, the concept of memes has also been adopted by psychology, sociology, anthropology and neuroscience. Although not without strong criticism, memetics has appeared to provide an explanation, on a scientifically verifiable basis, for the developmental mechanisms of the human mind and the dynamics underlying the evolution and transmission of culture. Memes dramatically amplified their nature as vectors of knowledge capable of impacting the culture of a given community, thanks to the development of the World Wide Web. Internet memes are undoubtedly the best known version of the phenomenon today. The telematic landing has placed memes among the tools by which new technologies

shape the interactions between human beings and consequently the ways in which they think, behave and communicate within a given community.

- 3 While the information sciences, semiotics, art history, sociology, philosophy and political science have been reflecting on the communicative developments of memes, the scholars of the Middle Ages, especially in Italy, has long remained indifferent to this phenomenon. Thanks to my personal experience in teaching medieval history at the University of Milan (La Statale), I will try to identify the memes that are intertwined with history and the possible changes in the historian's craft resulting from their communicative and didactic use. I would like to point out that I do not simply intend to share my teaching experience: rather, I would like to reason about the use of memes in current historical language as meta-sources, *i.e.* configurations that make use of new digital practices and languages (Genet, 1994).

Communicating history with memes

- 4 The relationship between memetics and history has primarily passed through visual studies. This has happened fairly recently, as a consequence of a decisive shift in the approach of the humanities and social sciences towards visual culture: the emergence of an increasingly multi-ethnic, global and mass society has brought to the fore the need for greater inclusiveness of the visual parameters of other cultures (which were not reduced to Western culture alone) or of other classes (which were not just the traditional elites).²
- 5 The paradigm shift has accelerated considerably in the transition phase between the second and third millennium, thanks to the new communication possibilities offered by the digital revolution and the web (Gazzini, 2023). Since then, historians have started to look at images not only from an artistic or documentary perspective, but also from a political and philosophical point of view: visual history in fact considers images as objects that deserve an autonomous approach as they condition the ways of seeing, perceiving, representing and communicating reality. It is now established that images "not only reflect history, but also influence and determine it" (Prampolini, 2021). The close link between history and memetics is also attested by the fact that, in order to decode a meme, it is necessary to know the context in which it is packaged and goes viral. The background is so important that some scholars have used memes to understand certain aspects of contemporary culture (Jones, Schieffelin, 2009): memes in fact depict the behaviour, beliefs, thoughts and actions of a particular community (Knobel, Lankshear, 2007).
- 6 From the perspective of visual history, reflecting on memes means questioning their capacity not only to describe reality, but also to influence and determine it. As actors and witnesses to the making of history, memes have begun to be collected and preserved in museums and archives, both physical and virtual. First of all, it is worth mentioning the *Know Your Meme* website,³ opened in December 2008, which censuses and documents a huge number of Internet viral phenomena, videos, memes, catchphrases, accompanied by articles and discussion forums on trending facts and phenomena.⁴ Other fixed installations, in the sense of durable (never mind digital), have been set up since the second decade of the 21st century. I remember the most important ones. In 2011, the #MUSEUdeMEMES was born from the activity of students and teachers of the Media and Communication courses at the Universidade Federal

Fluminense in Rio de Janeiro, with both popular and scientific intentions.⁵ Since 2014, the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, the most important institution dedicated to the preservation of American cultural heritage, has dedicated an entire section to web culture: the archive stores sites documenting the creation and sharing of emerging cultural traditions on the web, including memes.⁶ Since 2020, the Alexander Turnbull Library, a branch of the National Library of New Zealand, based in Wellington, has housed within its collections an archive of memes, most of which can be accessed online.⁷ Temporary exhibitions have also been held recently: from 16 July to 5 September 2021, the K11 Art Mall, a huge shopping mall in Hong Kong, in collaboration with 9GAG, an online entertainment giant with more than 57 million followers on Instagram, also based in Hong Kong, hosted an exhibition of the most famous memes with which a very diverse audience could also relate interactively.⁸

- 7 The fact that the recipients of initiatives such as these are users with the most diverse interests, cultural as well as recreational, should not turn up our noses. In the approach between memes and the Italian Middle Ages, for example, social networks were and continue to be the key. Pages such as *Feudalesimo e Libertà (Feudalism and Freedom)*⁹ or *Alessandro Barbero noi ti siamo vassalli (The vassals of Alessandro Barbero)*,¹⁰ whose access data reveal their high public popularity on Facebook and Instagram, have acquired great popularity. In this case, the reference to the Middle Ages is a pretext for satirizing contemporary society. There is no pretence of adherence to history: the images and language are only deliberately “antiquated” to immerse the reader from the very first glance in a medieval context that provokes, through the ironically pitiless comparison between the proud past and the degenerate present, a motion of hilarity.¹¹

Teaching history with memes

- 8 In addition to making memes the object of analysis and conservation, those who deal with history can also approach them from a didactic perspective. Indeed, memes lend themselves both to becoming lecture support materials and to serving as practical exercises for students. I will describe in detail an experience of teaching medieval history in an academic context. First, however, I would like to make a few remarks that also apply to other scientific and disciplinary fields.
- 9 A sharp increase in the use of memes in education occurred during the Coronavirus pandemic, when e-learning was resorted to in many areas of the world to obviate the need for social and health containment. Since then, the use of memes in education has been steadily increasing, which is why the observations I am proposing here are inevitably destined for rapid obsolescence. Nonetheless, I feel it is important to formulate them so that they may serve as a point of reference regarding the situation up to the entire second decade of the 21st century, practically a good twenty years after the birth of Internet memes themselves.
- 10 First of all, we should not assume that the use of memes in history teaching is widespread. At present, our main bibliographical references are just a few. On the Italian side, two papers by Raffaele Guazzone, referring to experiments conducted in secondary schools (Guazzone, 3 February 2021; Guazzone 20 January 2021), and an article of Public history (Pizzirusso *et al.*, 2019) date back to the pre-pandemic era. Little has changed in the following three years in the national context: apart from a reworking of the above-mentioned article in Public history,¹² and a reprise by Guazzone

himself on the dialogue between images and words for learning purposes, the only new papers published on the subject have been written by me together with Emanuele Curzel in relation to university didactics (Curzel, Gazzini, 2021), and by Raffaele Facchini and Davide Iacono on politics and popularisation (Facchini & Iacono, 2023).

- 11 As regards international historiography, in the pre-Covid era, it's worthy to remember just an essay by Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, who were among the first to sense the boom that memeing would reach on social media as a powerful tool for historical "meta-literacy" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007), and an article by Kim Wilkins, on the parodistic narration of the Middle Ages through memetics (Wilkins, 2014). Socio-sanitary lockdowns and e-learning have changed the situation, for the better. In March 2022, an interesting quantitative survey, conducted by four professors from the Universidad Católica in Ávila (Spain) belonging to different scientific-disciplinary areas (mathematics, engineering, pedagogy), came out: it regarded the use of memes and other humorous images in virtual learning environments in nineteen Latin American countries.
- 12 In Italy, the reluctance to use memes in teaching lurks mainly among teachers in the humanities. Colleagues in the hard sciences do not seem to pose any conceptual or ideological problems whatsoever. There is no trace of any such apprehension, for example, in the experiments conducted in Piedmontese schools in collaboration with the Mathematics Department of the University of Turin (Bernasconi *et al.*, 2019; Bini *et al.*, 2019). In this case, the opportunity to bring students closer together by offering them a less formal working environment, in which they can demonstrate non-standard skills, was judged to be an entirely positive experience. Memes were therefore seen as a useful tool to strengthen the impact of physics and mathematics education in today's culture and society. The only possible obstacle was seen in the willingness of teachers to adapt to the novelty, which was not always guaranteed.
- 13 The first objection that could be made to this more relaxed use of scientific memes, at least in Italy, concerns their subject matter: given that numbers and formulas are by nature devoted to synthesis, it does not seem in their case that memes can be the bearers of simplifications and trivialisations. This is self-evident. The other major problem that memes on mathematical subjects do not seem to suffer from is the risk of being instrumentalised for political purposes or lending themselves to undue comparisons with contemporary phenomena. But this is not so true, as teachers' and former students' reflections on the mutual influences between historical context and mathematics in totalitarian rather than democratic regimes confirm (Chiofalo, 1982; Guerraggio, 2013; Luciano, 2014; Valerio, 2020). In short, believing that some subjects are sheltered from ideological influences is a pious illusion. And in any case, disciplinary diversity is not an argument that can justify history teachers closing themselves off from adopting tools originally designed for social platforms. On the contrary: it has been verified that digital platforms can be environments in which not only interesting discussions can arise, but also solutions to open problems: an anonymous post that appeared in 2018 on the 4Chan platform made it possible to solve a complicated combinatorial calculus problem.

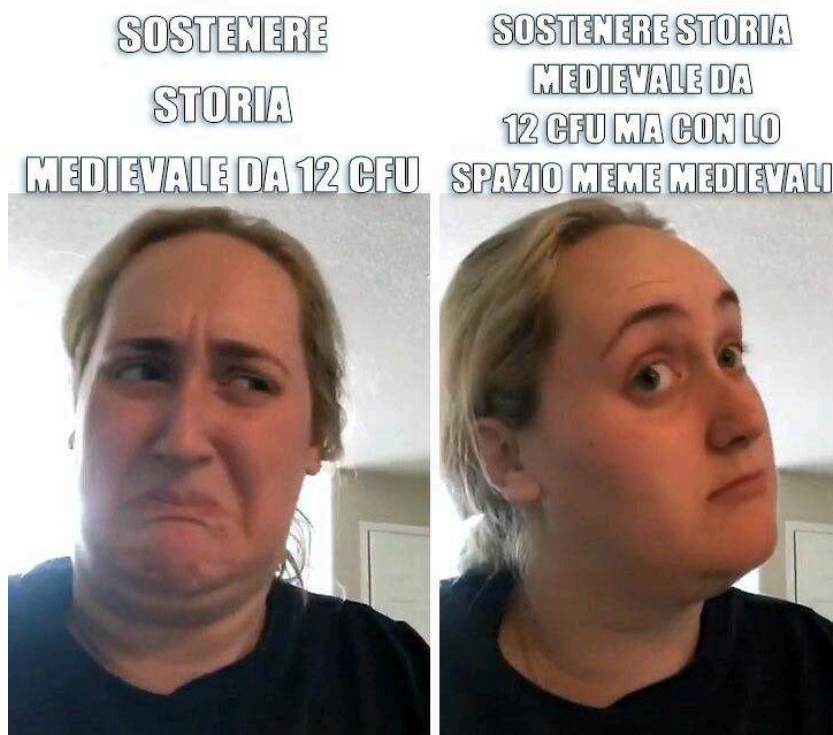
Medieval history and memes

- 14 The entry of memes into a Milanese university course in Medieval history took place during the suspension of face-to-face teaching activities, decided by the Italian government during the health lockdown periods set up to deal with the Coronavirus pandemic. In the 2020-21 academic year, I decided to take up the educational challenge that the extraordinary times and circumstances were throwing down, offering an e-learning capable of finding in memetics a new way for interacting with the class and providing moments of levity to students who were very tried by the pandemic.
- 15 From the very first lesson of my BA Medieval history course, I illustrated the “Meme Space” project to my students enrolled in History, Humanities, and Philosophy degree classes. I explained to them the meaning of the operation: helping the fixation of historiographical concepts and theories through their memetic synthesis; stimulating attention in class in order to grasp the interpretative keys of historical phenomena on which to build a meme; reasoning about the opportunities and risks of the tool; building the class group by having them share a new, hopefully enjoyable, experience that would show how even remotely there could be a space dedicated to social interaction. And, last but not least, revising the learner’s usual approach to the text: no longer “I read because I have to report to the teacher” but “I read to produce my own story,” following the rules of memoir creation that fall under the so-called “product’s didactics,” in which the rules of production are dictated by the type of final product (Bonelli, 2006). I also informed students that their best memes would be shown both on my professional Facebook page¹³ and on *Parlare di storia*, a website where since 2021 materials (texts, audios, videos) produced by the students of the Department of Historical Studies of the Milan State University have been published.¹⁴
- 16 I turned my students into “prosumers”:¹⁵ users of history, university lectures, multimedia products and, at the same time, producers of content, such as didactic tools and digital iconographic narratives. I wondered whether this action was licit. Opposing views have been expressed on the role of the prosumer in the digital world: there are those who have seen it as a symbol of the democratisation of culture (*i.e.* the products of the wiki web application), and those who have considered it a means of exploiting collective intelligence (Frazzetto, 2012). Considering, however, that in the 2.0 society within which we move, students nonetheless play the role of prosumers—albeit often unconsciously—when they participate in forums, blogs, and social networks, I finally decided to proceed: my action, on the other hand, had a wholly formative purpose, thanks to the shift from a passive reception of information to a creative production of cultural materials. Memes can be considered to all intents and purposes a cultural product of digital society and therefore relevant to the courses of study undertaken by the students.
- 17 The last week before the end of classes, I returned to the issue, offering the students a little history of memes and some reflections on the relationship between memes and history. I illustrated ways to make them¹⁶ and suggested sites where to find images, including from the medieval period.¹⁷ Finally, I clarified the value of the activity in terms of the overall assessment: making a meme would not affect the final grade. This was both because the memetic activity was intended as a didactic tool and not as the subject of the medieval course, and because it seemed to me that the ludiform situation required rather a discursive type of evaluation:¹⁸ starting from the subject of the meme,

and how it had been represented, I would reason with my students about what worked of their job and what could be improved or changed.

- 18 The reception given to this proposal was excellent from the outset, as summarised by a meme from student Agnese Tremolada [fig. 1]. In fact, none of the students shirked the “meme challenge.” Among other things, I would like to stress that no particular predisposition emerged, neither by gender (males and females proved equally interested and ability), nor by age (the *âgés* students were just as at ease as their younger mates).

Figure 1



Author: Agnese Tremolada. Caption. On the left: Taking the 12 cfu Medieval History exam. On the right: Taking the 12 cfu Medieval History exam but with medieval “meme space.”

- 19 On the strength of these results, I renewed the experience the following year, modifying some steps of the contest. In the first year, the selection to arrive at the best memes was first carried out in the classroom, together with the students themselves, and then assigned to an external jury for the final judgement. The following year, however, after reading the reports containing students’ opinions on my teaching, I preferred to avoid the classroom selection step: while the “Meme Space” had received only praise, participation in the product skimming had been deemed uninteresting by some. Freed from what I had felt in my heart to be more of an act of duty, i.e. to give students the opportunity to participate in the judging phase, I not only eliminated this first step, but also changed the timing of delivery, moving it from the end of the course to the time of the examination. The students, in order to prove that they had actually followed the lectures (because with the presence/remote alternation of blended learning I was no longer clear who they actually were), would have to bring one or more memes they had devised to the examination: to break the ice, the first question

would focus on one of the topics they had “memed.” In the third, and at the moment final,¹⁹ year of the “Meme Space,” I finally dispensed with the contest, but maintained the obligation for the students to present one or more memes of their own design at the time of the final exam.

- 20 In the first two years of this didactic experience, the memes produced by the students were sent for evaluation to a jury composed of experts chosen outside the Milanese university (with the exception of myself) and not necessarily belonging to the academy. During the two-year contest period, I chose university professors of Medieval history, Didactics of history, and History of christianity as experts, as well as high school teachers, bloggers, journalists, and public historians. They were all Italian but with different backgrounds and regional origins. The third year, as written, there was no competition: the memes were simply proof of class attendance. The changement, I should point out, was purely due to organizational issues and certainly not to dissatisfaction with the contest format. Judging the memes meant in fact not only testing the students’ digital skills and historiographic knowledge, but also the professor’s teaching. It was therefore a double test. Memes showed that some messages had been very well received, others less so: surely this also depended on how the topics were presented.
- 21 It was the Investiture controversy—with Gregory VII and Henry IV in the leading roles, followed at a distance by Matilda of Canossa—that suggested some of the most apt memes that deserved first, second and fourth place in the first edition [fig. 2, 3, 4] and third and sixth place in the next [fig. 5, 6]. Another podium theme turned out to be the feudalism-rural lordship pair that won gold and silver in the 2021-2022 edition [fig. 7, 8] and bronze and seventh place in 2020-2021 [fig. 9, 10]. In this regard, allow me to respond to those who turn their noses up at these experiments, believing that memes inevitably lead to trivialisation, with the following challenge: try your hand at making rural lordship funny, while demonstrating that you accurately capture its historical essence, and then we’ll talk!

Figure 2



Author: Camilla Maffinelli. Caption. On the top: Henry IV: I can appoint bishops, can't I? Down, on the left: Gregory VII: No, laymen are not allowed. Down, on the right: Ah, can't!?

Figure 3

Rarissima foto di Enrico IV durante il suo soggiorno a Canossa (01/1077 colorized)



Author: Corporazione Memetica (Pilenga, Restelli, Tovagliaro, Uggetti, Vitali). Caption: Rare photo of Henry IV during his stay at Canossa (01/1077 colorized).

Figure 4



Author: Rocco Palleria. Caption. Above: What's all the racket? Below: Ah, we are still on the twenty-fourth statement of the *Dictatus papae*.

Figure 5



Author: Francesco Taricone. Caption: Gregory VII had a formidable programme: appointment of bishops, kissing of feet, imperial deposition and free excommunications!

Figure 6

Ricostruzione a colori di Enrico IV fuori dal castello di Canossa:



Author: Lorenzo Santini. Caption: Colorization of Henry IV outside Canossa Castle.

Figure 7



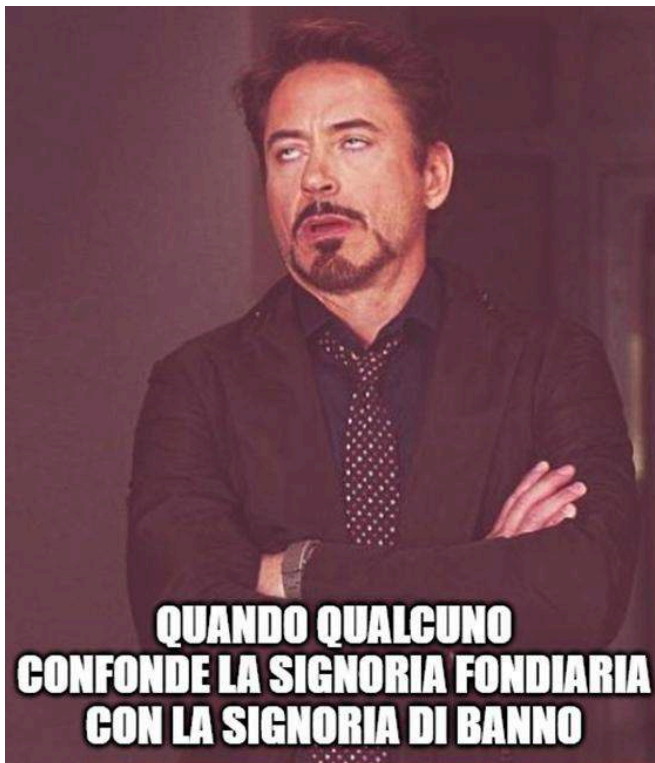
Author: Alessandro Tremolada. Caption. First line: The pyramid system Second line: of feudalism Third line: is a false myth Fourth line: The pyramid system of feudalism is a false myth: vassals, valvassors, valvassins.

Figure 8



Author: Francesco Taricone. Caption. She: Surely he is thinking of Italy out of the World Cup or his mistress He: What the hell is the difference between land lordship and bannal lordship?

Figure 9



Author: Agnese Tremolada. Caption. When confusing land lordship with bannal lordship.

Figure 10



Author: Monica Orlandini. Caption. Above: When "Wow! A new castle!" Below: But you work in the land lordship next door.

Conclusions

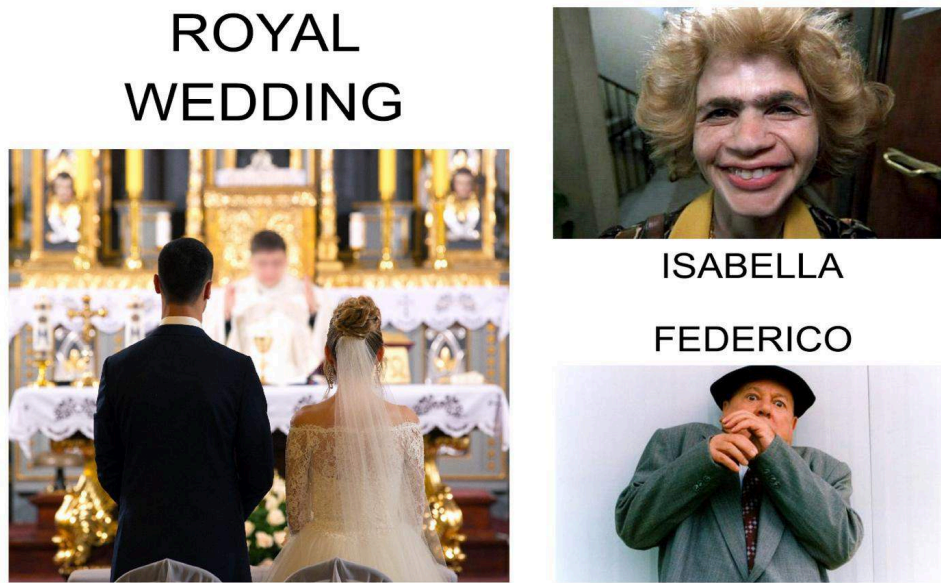
- 22 I would like to close with a couple of remarks on a very sensitive issue that emerged during this experiment: “inconvenient” topics. Some of the memes produced in fact incur in categories that we nowadays classify as inappropriate because they fall into the politically incorrect. It happened in the case of a juxtaposition between Charles Martel [fig. 11] and Muslim warriors represented in the guise of members of Isis, or in cases of body shaming: for example, when Isabella of Brienne, whom Frederick II would have considered so unattractive that he preferred her cousin on their wedding night, is shown with the features of Mariangela, the ungainly daughter of the accountant Ugo Fantozzi played by the actor Paolo Villaggio [fig. 12]. It is the effect of new sensitivities on the one hand, and of an increasingly puritanism on the other, which often lead to self-censorship on “sensitive” topics as religion, sexuality, women, physical appearance. Insults must be avoided, of course. But what remains of the freedom to satirize or even just to be ironic? There are comedians from even the recent past who today could no longer offer the sketches and catchphrases that characterised them.

Figure 11



Author: Paolo Rastelli. Caption: Charlie, in Poitiers you had it easy, trust me!

Figure 12



Author: Francesco Taricone. Caption: Royal wedding. Isabella of Brienne. Frederick II Hohenstaufen.

- 23 Let us think again of the aforementioned Paolo Villaggio and the mockery of ugliness that characterised the sagas of his alter egos Fracchia and Fantozzi: could the monstrosity of his daughter, wife and even of his mistress still be cause for mockery or outright insult today? Clearly not. Yet, body shaming, as a component of ridiculing the opponent, is part of the character description we find in the same medieval sources, from Liutprand of Cremona to Salimbene de Adam. Depriving oneself of these witnesses is a form of censorship. From the fair rejection of vulgar mockery towards physicalities that do not adhere to the canons of beauty (which are, moreover, constantly evolving) to the rewriting of reality, and therefore of history, the step is short. This too may prove to be useful food for thought prompted by didactic memetics.²⁰

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Belting, H. (2001). *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*. Wilhelm Fink Verlag.

Bernasconi, F., Caglio, R., Bini, G. (2020). "I meme matematici: un'applicazione alle potenze." In Bonino, R., Marocchi, D., Rinaudo, M., Serio, M. (eds.), *Matematica e fisica nella cultura e nella società*. Università degli Studi di Torino. <https://www.collane.unito.it/oa/items/show/57#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0>

Bini, G., Montagnani, M. (2020). "Comprendere, creare e utilizzare in classe i meme matematici." In Bonino, R., Marocchi, D., Rinaudo, M., Serio, M. (eds.), *Matematica e fisica nella cultura e nella società*. Università degli Studi di Torino. <https://www.collane.unito.it/oa/items/show/57#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0>

- Bonelli, C. (2006). "Il laboratorio come didattica del prodotto." In Bernardi, P. (ed.), *Insegnare storia. Guida alla didattica del laboratorio storico*. UTET Università.
- Boschetti, L., Ditrani, S., Guazzone, R. (2022). *Insegnare storia con le nuove tecnologie. Didattica aumentata per bambini e adolescenti*. Carocci.
- Brusa, A. (2022). *Giochi per imparare la storia*. Carocci.
- Buck-Morss, S. (2004). "Visual studies and global imagination," *Papers of Surrealism*, 2.
- Burke, P. (2001). *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*. Cornell University Press.
- Chagas, V. (2020). "Da memética aos estudos sobre memes: uma revisão da literatura concernente ao campo nas últimas cinco décadas (1976-2019)." In Chagas, V. (ed.), *A cultura dos memes: aspectos sociológicos e dimensões políticas de um fenômeno do mundo digital*. EDUFBA.
- Chiofalo, G. (1982). *Matematica e ideologia*. Gangemi Editore.
- Corsini, C. (2023). *La valutazione che educa. Liberare insegnamento e apprendimento dalla tirannia del voto*. Franco Angeli.
- Curzel, E., Gazzini, M. (2021). "Il ceffone di Batman. Quando anche i docenti universitari imparano cosa sono i memi," *Historia Ludens*, 18 July. <http://www.historialudens.it/didattica-della-storia/440-il-ceffone-di-batman-quando-anche-i-docenti-universitari-imparano-cosa-sono-i-memi.html>
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press.
- Di Legge, M., Mantovani, F., Meloni, I. (2022). "What does it meme? Public history in the Internet memes Era." In Noiret, S., Tebeau, M., Zaagsma, G. (eds.), *Handbook of Digital Public History*. De Gruyter.
- Elkins, J. (2003). *Visual Studies. A Skeptical Introduction*. Routledge.
- Farago, C. J., Zwijnenberg, R. (eds.) (2003). *Compelling visibility. The Work of Art in and out of History*. University of Minnesota Print.
- Frazzetto, G. (2012). "Prosumer e star dei videogiochi," *Game. The Italian Journal of Game Studies*, 1. <https://www.gamejournal.it/italiano-prosumer-e-star-dei-videogiochi/>
- Gazzini, M. (2023). "Medievisti e sfide digitali. Ricerca, didattica e public engagement in Italia tra secondo e terzo millennio," *Rivista di Ricerca e Didattica Digitale*, 3. <https://studiumeditore.it/riviste/rivista-di-ricerca-e-didattica-digitale/>
- Genet, J. P. (1994). "Source, métasource, texte, histoire." In Bocchi, F., Denley, P. (eds.), *Storia & multimedia*. Grafis Edizioni.
- Guazzone, R. (2021). "MEME-NTO MORI. Ovvero come sfottere papi e imperatori al tempo dei social (e leggere attentamente il manuale)," *Historia Ludens*, 20 January. <http://www.historialudens.it/didattica-della-storia/399-memento-mori-ovvero-come-sfottere-papi-e-imperatori-al-tempo-dei-social-e-leggere-attentamente-il-manuale.html>
- Guazzone, R. (2021). "La storia non fa ridere. I meme nella didattica e nel dibattito pubblico," *Historia Ludens*, 3 February. <http://www.historialudens.it/didattica-della-storia/402-la-storia-non-fa-ridere-i-meme-nella-didattica-e-nel-dibattito-pubblico.html>
- Knobel, M., Lankshear, C. (2007). "Online memes, affinities, and cultural production." *A new literacies sampler*. Peter Lang
- Jenks, C. (dir.) (1995). *Visual Culture*. Routledge.

- Jones, G., Schieffelin, B. (2009). "Talking text and talking back: "My BFF Jill" from boob tube to YouTube," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01481.x>
- Lolli, A. (2017). *La guerra dei meme. Fenomenologia di uno scherzo infinito*. Effequ.
- Maifreda, G. (2022). *Immagini contese. Storia politica delle figure dal Rinascimento alla cancel culture*. Feltrinelli.
- Menduni, E. (2008). "Prosumer." *Enciclopedia della Scienza e della Tecnica*. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/prosumer_\(Enciclopedia-della-Scienza-e-della-Tecnica\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/prosumer_(Enciclopedia-della-Scienza-e-della-Tecnica)/)
- Mirzoeff, N. (1999). *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Routledge.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (2008). *Pictorial turn. Saggi di cultura visuale*. Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Pizzirusso, I., Sorrentino, G., Meloni, I., Mantovani, F., Di Legge, M. (2019). "Questa è public history? I meme e la storia," *Novecento.org*, 12 march. <https://www.novecento.org/uso-pubblico-della-storia/questa-e-public-history-i-meme-e-la-storia-3609/>
- Prampolini, A. (2021). "La visual history. Che cos'è e quali storie ci fa conoscere," *Historia ludens*, 10 february. <https://www.historialudens.it/biblioteca/404-la-visual-history-che-cos-e-e-quali-storie-ci-fa-conoscere.html>
- Rampley, M. (dir.) (2005). *Exploring visual culture. Definitions, concepts, contexts*. De Gruyter.
- Shifman, L. (2013). "Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18.
- Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in Digital Culture*. The MIT Press.
- Terrosi, R. (2015). "Visual studies." *Enciclopedia Italiana*, IX Appendice. Treccani degli Alfieri. https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/visual-studies_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/
- Toffler, A. (1980). *The Third Wave*. William Morrow & Company.
- Valerio, C. (2020). *La matematica è politica*. Einaudi.
- Vélez Ruiz, M. C., Coutinho dos Santos, J. (2021). "Memes and entomology: A didactic sequence through Ecuadorian students' - Perspective," *Research, Society and Development*, 10. <https://rsdjournal.org/index.php/rsd/article/view/15228>
- Wikipedia (2024). "Richard Dawkins." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Dawkins
- Williams, G. C. (1966). *Adaptation and Natural Selection. A Critique of Some Current Evolutionary Thought*. Princeton University Press.
- Wilkins, K. (2014). "Valhallolz: Medievalist humor on the Internet," *Postmedieval. A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 5.

NOTES

1. The concept and the term "meme"—a neologism derived from the fusion of the Greek words *μίμημα/μίμησις* (both meaning imitation, image, copy) and the English "gene" (biological replicator)—were born in 1976 when the British biologist and ethologist Richard Dawkins, in one of the chapters of his book entitled *The Selfish Gene*, introduced for the first time the idea of memes to motivate his theory that human evolution is determined by culture and learning that lead to replication through language, religious beliefs, sport, fashion, behaviours and ideas

(Dawkins, 1976). Dawkins identified the gene, rather than the individual or the species, as the subject of natural selection, drawing inspiration from the American biologist George C. Williams, who had previously analysed animal evolution from the point of view of the gene, rather than the individual organism (Williams, 1966).

2. On this cultural turn, second in importance only to the linguistic turn, see: *Visual culture*, 1995; Mirzoeff, 1999; Belting, 2001; Burke, 2001; Elkins, 2003; *Compelling visuality*, 2003; Buck-Morss, 2004; *Exploring visual culture*, 2005; Mitchell, 2008; Terrosi, 2015; Maifreda, 2022.

3. Go to : <https://knowyourmeme.com/>.

4. Go to : Published on the e-journal *Meme Insider*, founded in 2016: <https://memeinsider.com/about>.

5. Go to : <https://museudememes.com.br/>.

6. Go to : <https://www.loc.gov/collections/web-cultures-web-archive/>.

7. Go to : <https://natlib.govt.nz/blog/posts/theyre-the-same-picture-collecting-memes-at-the-alexander-turnbull-library?search%5Bpath%5D=items&search%5Btext%5D=memes>.

8. Go to : <https://www.tag43.it/museo-meme-cosa-si-trova-attrazioni-visitatori-quali-sono-hong-kong/>.

9. Go to : https://www.facebook.com/feudalesimoeliberta/?locale=it_IT, with more than 700,000 followers.

10. Go to : https://www.facebook.com/barberodominus/?locale=it_IT; with more than 53,000 followers. A blog and website have been added since 2020: <https://www.vassallidibarbero.it/>.

11. For more information see Facchini & Iacono (2023).

12. By three of the five previous authors: Di Legge *et al.* (2022).

13. Go to : <https://www.facebook.com/corsostoriamedievalgazzini>.

14. Go to : <https://www.parlareistoria.it>. The images linked to the present paper come from this website. A wider selection is going to be published in a new book of mine: *Meme o non meme? Contaminazioni tra evolucionismo, visual history e medievistica* (ISIME, 2024, in press).

15. Neologism derived from the crisis of the two English terms “producer” and “consumer” that became famous thanks to Alvin Toffler. The activity of prosumers, *i.e.* consumers who, in the very act of consuming, contribute to production, is identified as typical of the third of the three waves of economic and informational organisation (the agricultural age with its old media, the industrial age and mass media, and finally the digital age of new media) theorised by Toffler to explain the economic development of human societies (Toffler, 1980; Menduni, 2008).

16. As modern meme generators I have indicated Imgflip (<https://imgflip.com>) and MemeCreator (<https://memecreator.org/>).

17. E.g. the Dutch KB Nationale Bibliotheek (<https://www.medievalmemes.org/>), or Historic Tale Construction Kit - Bayeaux (<http://htck.github.io/bayeux/#!/#%2F>), heir to the original pioneering application (dating back to 2002!) entitled *The Historic Tale Construction Kit* based on characters and other elements found on the Bayeux tapestry (1066).

18. Indeed, Brusa (2022, p. 81) advises against this. More extreme: Corsini (2023).

19. Last not because I have abandoned the “meme space,” but simply because I have been granted a leave from teaching for the entire academic year 2023-24.

20. All websites have been visited on the 26th of May 2024.

ABSTRACTS

The article aims to offer the contribution of a medievalist to an interdisciplinary reflection on memetics. First, memes will be identified as meta-sources, i.e. configurations that make use of new digital practices and languages. Focusing on those memes with connections to medieval history, the contribution will investigate the possible changes brought to the historian's craft by their communicative and didactic use.

INDEX

Keywords: meme, memetics, teaching, history, Medieval

AUTHOR

MARINA GAZZINI

Marina Gazzini is associate professor of Medieval History at the University of Milan. Her scientific interests have been mainly oriented towards the analysis of social, economic, cultural and religious phenomena considered within the political-institutional framework of the medieval West. She has also been concerned with the processes of pouring historical knowledge into the digital world, exploring its potential at the scientific, educational and popular level. Her major publications include: *"Dare et habere." Il mondo di un mercante milanese del Quattrocento*, Reti Medievali E-book 3, Firenze, FUP, 2002; *Confraternite e società cittadina nel medioevo italiano*, Bologna, Clueb, 2006; *Storie di vita e di malavita. Criminali, poveri e altri miserabili nelle carceri di Milano alla fine del medioevo*, Reti medievali E-book 30, Firenze, FUP, 2017. She edited *Ospedali e montagne. Paesaggi, funzioni, poteri (secoli XI-XV)*, with T. Frank, *Quaderni degli Studi di Storia Medioevale e di Diplomatica*, V, Milano-Torino 2021; and *Vere storie di medioevi falsi. Esempi, pretesti, metodologie*, Roma, ISIME, 2023.